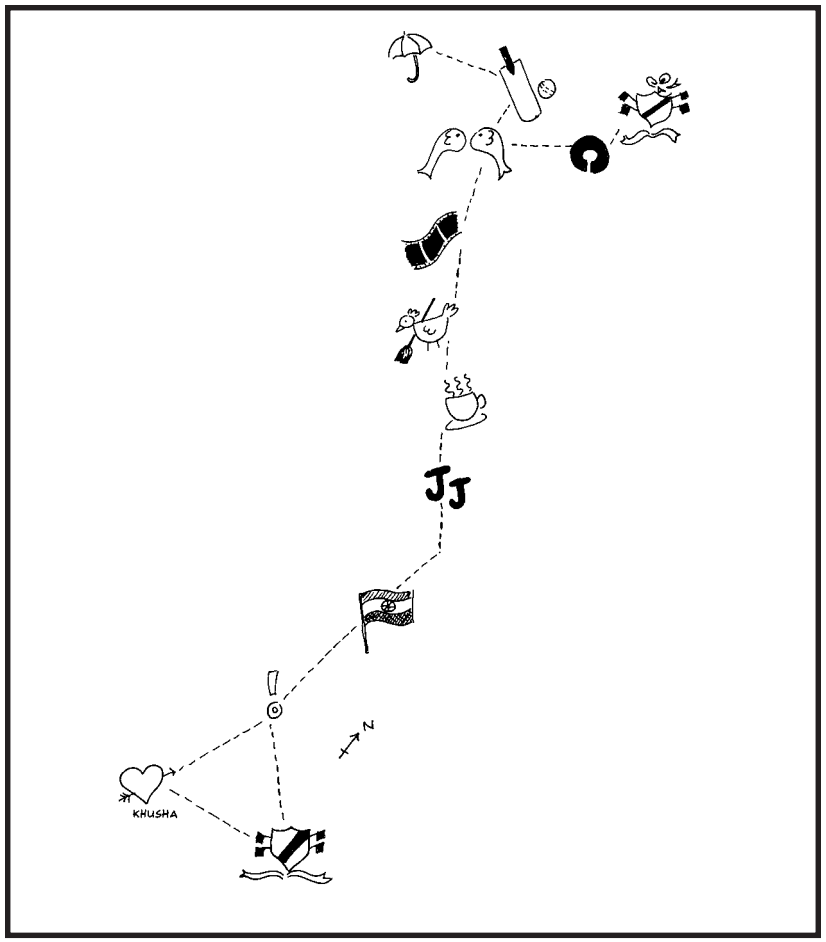
Route map made of the Rajpath by Ishita Das



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Slowly down the Rajpath

Illustrated by
Shubhrajit Das
2007

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Slowly down the Rajpath

(To Chini on her twentieth birthday)

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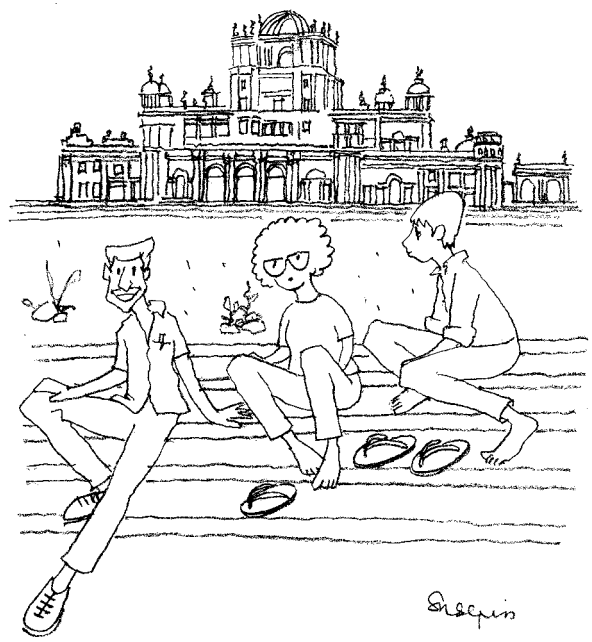
2007

Constantia, the oldest and most imposing building of the La Martiniere Boys College, built by a French Major Claude Martin in 1800, loomed large over the three friends as they lazed around its steps. School had got over and the two boarders, Siddhartha and Dasharatha, were free to do as they pleased. Megha, their friend had come over to meet them. All three sat on the long steps of the grand old building. Sid, as Siddhartha was called, balanced himself on the balustrade, absent-mindedly gazing at the lions and other statues which adorned the building, a cap half covering his face from the sun. Dash, short for Dasharatha, sat on the grass chewing a blade aimlessly. Megha, fidgeted as she tried to lounge comfortably on the steps.



Sid was a tall, lean boy, with a long neck and hair like Richie Rich. He always wore blue jeans and a casual white shirt. He was a lively person with a wide smile and an insatiable hunger for pranks. Dash, on the other hand was more serious and studious. Stockier built than Sid, his favourite colour was khakhi. They were both students of class twelve, and boarders, in La Martiniere. Meghna was in the same class but a student of La Martiniere Girls College and a day scholar. She often came to meet the boys after school and on holidays. Meghna was short, with curly black hair and a short temper that got her the name, Maggi, after the ëtwo minute noodlesí. Dressed in jeans and a shirt, wanting some action, she was getting very restless.

ìCome on guys, letís do something. Itís a beautiful day,î she said. Sid did not budge and continued to appraise the building. Dash answered, ìWhat can we do?î

ìAnything,î Maggi said impatiently.

ìAnything is not something,î piped in Sid. ìBe specific.î

ì We could go to the new mall,î countered Maggi.

ìNah, too girly,î said Dash.

ìWhat about the movies,î Maggi suggested.

ìNo money,î replied Sid not moving an inch.

ì You suggest something. You people are only the voice of dissent,î Maggi said angrily.

ì Well you are the local person between the three of us. And anyway we can play football or watch cricket. It is

you who is hard to please,î replied Sid totally unperturbed by the outburst. With no more ideas the three went back to what they doing earlier; nothing.

ìLets have a cycle-marathon,î Maggi suggested, hoping to engage the interest of the boys, which she did.

ìInteresting,î said Dash.

ì Youíll loose,î said Sid.

ìNo, I wonít,î retorted Maggi. ìLets set out the route and the rules.

ìWhat rules?î Asked Sid. ìWeíll have a starting point and a finishing point.î

ì We may need to stop,î said Dash.

ìWhy, weíre neither horses nor cars who need to re-fuel,î Sid continued.

ì We can go along the Rajpath,î Maggi continued, totally ignoring the comments of her friends.

ìWhere and whatís that,î both her friends said simultaneously.

ìBefore the Nawabi rule, Lucknow had very narrow and dirty streets. So any traveler who came back from Lucknow had a very poor opinion of the city. Nawab Saadat Ali Khan decided to change that, so in the earlier part of the nineteenth century he developed a broad street, later called Hazratganj . And henceforth any travelers or dignitaries who came to Lucknow were taken through this wide street, thereby avoiding the narrow streets and criticisms for the same.î

Maggi answered patiently. ìThis street or Rajpath starts at the Dilkusha palace and finishes at the Chattar Manzil Palace.î

ìFine,î said Dash. Sid nodded in agreement.

ì We will carry water and some eatables.î Maggi continued.

ìWhy are you always thinking of food? Youíll get really fat,î jabbed Sid.

ì Youíll be the first one to eat,î replied Maggi unfazed by the dig.

ìLetís draw out a small route map,î said Dash and immediately got busy sketching on the ground with a stick.

ìLet me do it! I know the place better,î said Maggi.

ìBut you are a bad sketch,î said Sid, again trying to pick up a fight with her.

ìOh! Yeah! You think you are very good,î said Maggi.

ìNo, that wasnít me, Dash wanted to sketch,î said Sid seriously, but happy that he had succeeded in irritating Maggi. Dash knew this bickering would continue for sometime so he got up to get some paper and a pen. When he returned, his two other friends were still arguing and had now started throwing things at each other.

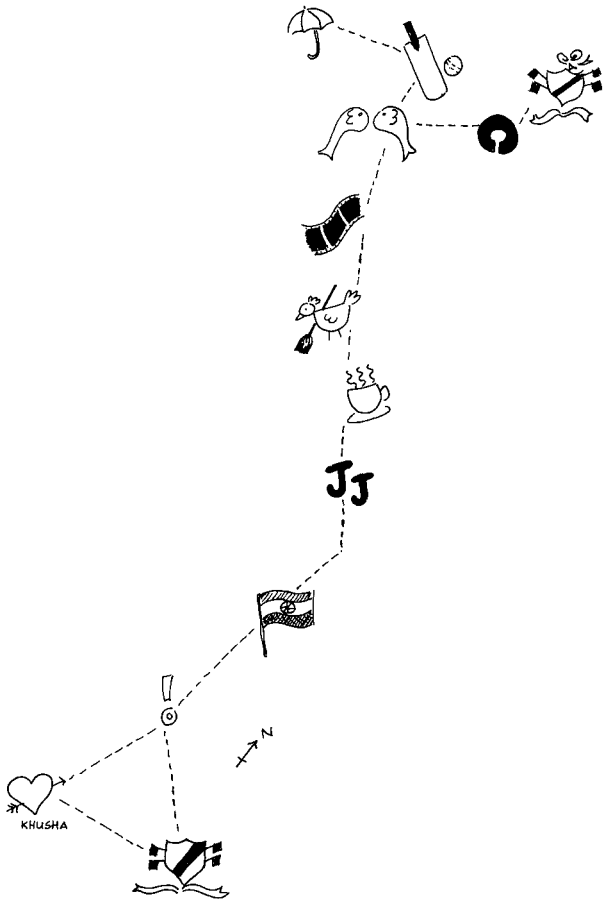
ìDonít behave like babies,î said Dash, now a little put off by their behaviour.

ìSid started it, he threw my chappal. It is now lying near the senior dorm,î wailed Maggi.

ìSid, go and get it,î ordered Dash, behaving all grown up.

ìIf she wants it, she can go. Iím not going,î said Sid.

ì Well, you know girls are not allowed near the dorms,î said Dash. At that Sid left, grumbling as he went while the other two busied themselves trying to make a route map. After much arguing and many rough drafts the map was finally complete.



ìThis looks all right,î said Dash satisfied.

ìHmm, will do,î nodded Maggi. ìLetís make three copies of the map so that we can each carry one.î

ì You do that while I go and get Sid. God knows where he has disappeared,î replied Dash and walked off as Maggi busied herself with the drawings. They returned after a few minutes, Sid holding Maggiís chappal on a stick and not looking too happy about it too. He dropped the chappal in front of Maggi and poked the stick in her back.

ìThere dumbo, take it.î

ìOh! Thanks,î Maggi replied, too preoccupied with her work to rise to the bait.

ìLetís get our cycles and move,î she said instead.

ìWhat? Cycles?î Asked Sid and Dash in unison.

ìHow else are we going to have a cycle-marathon?î She retorted indignantly.

ìBut you know we donít have cycles,î said Sid.

ìBeg, borrow, or steal!î She answered. Grumbling the two went off again and came back all too soon with one cycle.

ìJust one?î Maggi asked.

ì Yes, we could only manage this one,î replied Dash. ìEveryone else has left, itís a Sunday. î

ìWhat do we do now?î she asked.

ì We can do doubles, one of us can take Maggi,î Dash offered chivalrously.

ìIím not carrying that fatso,î said Sid in a tone that brooked no argument.

ìI am not fat,î exclaimed Maggi. Sensing another fight

Dash quickly offered to take her doubles. After collecting the water bottles and some snacks from the canteen, the trio set off on foot, pulling the cycles along.

ìIts nearly twelve,î said Sid

ì We could have started earlier if you hadnít thrown my chappal,î replied Maggi.

ì You started it,î said Sid.

ìOh! Shut up you two and stop acting like kids,î said Dash angrily. The three came out of the La Martiniere campus and mounted their cycles. Maggi perched herself on the pillion seat behind Dash. Sid, who was sitting on his bike, started laughing and nearly fell off his seat.

ìWhatís so funny?î Asked Dash.

ì You both look as if you have come from a circus; a clown carrying a baby elephant,î Sid replied merrily.

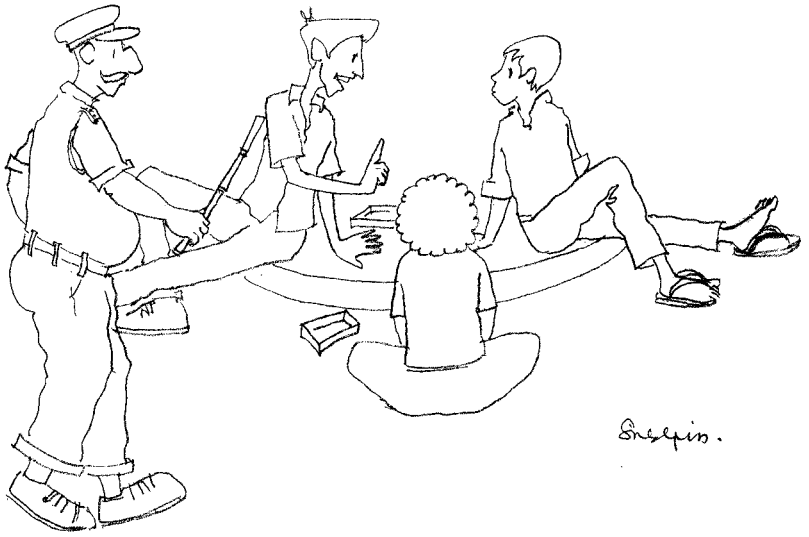
ìOh! Just you wait,î saying that Maggi jumped off the cycle and made a dash at Sid. Sensing her action, Sid cycled off quickly to a safe distance leaving Maggi waving her hands in anger.

ìCome on, heís just joking,î said Dash. ìClimb on or he will win the race.î Mumbling Maggi sat on the seat again and the two took off behind Sid. They went past the golf course towards the Loreto Convent circle. Sid had already reached before them and stood waiting for his other two friends, still smiling. Ignoring him completely, Maggi took out the map as the other two peered over her shoulder to decide the next course of action.

ì We have to turn left and go to the Dilkusha palace first. Built by Nawab Saadat Ali Khan for entertaining his European guests, it is an exact copy of Seaton Delaval, a country house in North England. It is a couple of kilometers from here. That is where the Raj Path started,î explained Maggi. ì The wide street was studded with many large country houses, or *kothis*, which showcased the power and splendor of the rulers. The first among them is the Hyatt Baksh or the Governor House today. That building is a little ahead to our right. So we will have to go to Dilkusha and come back on the same road,î she continued.

ìWhy do we have to go down the same road twice! Iím hungry!î declared Sid.

ìBecause that is the only route from here, and how can you be hungry, weíve just started,î replied Maggi.



ìLetís eat first and drop Dilkusha,î suggested Dash. ì We could consider this a starting point.î Maggi and Sid for once agreed and started looking around for a place to sit. They finally settled for the small green patch in the middle of the crossroads. Being a Sunday the roads were not crowded. The trio parked their cycles on the sidewalk and Maggi took out her tiffin. Her mother had packed *alu parantha* and *aam ka achar* for her. Both the boarders dived at the food and the tiffin was empty in no time. Just as they drinking water, they saw a policeman coming towards them. The three knew he was coming to shoo them off. They hurriedly packed their stuff and started walking off towards the edge of the road.

ìNow what?î Asked Dash.

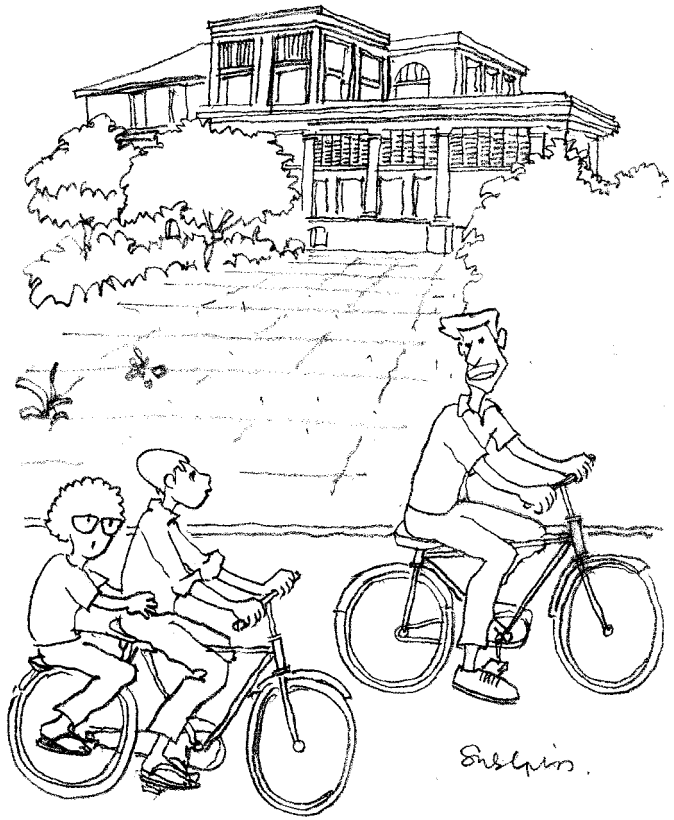
ìLets set our watches so that we know who wins,î answered Maggi.

ìWhat, with Dash carrying a baby elephant, you will never win,î jeered Sid. Sensing yet another verbal duel Dash quickly replied, ìLets not race, but go anyways. It is a wonderful day and the trip sounds exciting.î

ìNo, not after we took so much time to plan everything,î said a disappointed Sid.

ìWhat did you do anyway? Just sat their and made trouble,î said Dash.

ìOh! Well,î said Sid, knowing all that Dash said to be true. And at that the trio set off on the Raj Path past the Kothi Hyatt Baksh.



Like Constantia, Major Claude Martin had also built this *kothi*. Since then it has seen many changes and the original structure is difficult to identify. Down the road they stopped at the Hazratganj crossing, with the General Post Office on the left and the Christ Church College on the right. Both were built during the Colonial period. They moved on as the lights turned green. Maggi pointed out the Jahangirabad Mansion to her friends, and informed them that it housed the Coffee House, (adjacent to the JJ bakers) famous as a haunt of the freedom fighters.

They crossed the Janpath, the market that boasted of many *chikan* dress material shops. She further informed them that during the Nawabs, the Begum Kothi was located there, but was broken down to give way to the large commercial complex. During the British period, Hazratganj was further developed as an elite market for the Europeans, with covered walkways and cinema theatres. Mayfair, was one such theatre, which was shut down some years back.

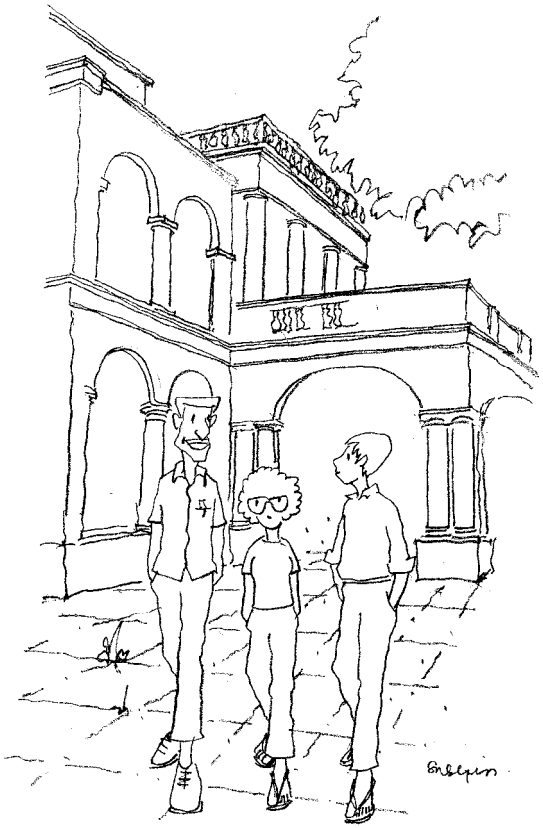
ìRemember the film, *The Alien*, we saw there?î asked Dash.

ìHow can I forget that,î answered Maggi laughing.

ìWhatís so funny,î said Sid.

ìDonít you remember, while we were watching that film you kept scaring me about the sudden appearance of the snake-like alien. You were so engrossed in trying to make me look silly, that when the alien appeared on the screen, it was you and not me who jumped up a feet from the chair. Me, I was unfazed, as I was quite prepared for its arrival, thanks to you.î Maggi giggled as she narrated the story. Dash joined in too.

ì Youíre making it up,î said Sid, visibly annoyed. He pedaled on furiously and left his two other friends behind. He moved past the Sibtainabad Imambara, (also known as the Maqbara of Amjad Ali. It is located within a huge walled compound with two magnificent gates, one of them abutting the Hazratganj street) and slowed down near the District Magistrateís office and residence.



ìThat looks interesting, when was it made?î He asked Maggi changing the subject.

ìThat is the Zahur Baksh kothi probably built by Nawab Saadat Ali Khan. We will cross several other kothis like this one. On the right where the State Bank of India is located today, is the Tara wali kothi. It was built as an observatory and today is a part of the bank. Adjacent to that is the Khurshid Manzil which is my school building. Near that is the Moti Mahal kothi. Most of these were made or bought by the same Nawab as he developed the ënewí Lucknow

along the Gomti river. Beyond this point on the left, is the Kaiserbagh palace, which was built by Nawab Wajid Ali Shah later, but we will not go there. Instead we will go to Saadat Aliís Chattar Manzil palace,î replied Maggi.

The trio moved towards the K.D. Singh Babu stadium to go to the Chattar Manzil palace, their final destination. They crossed the Hotel Clarks Awadh and reached the Central Drug Research Institute building.

ìThatís the Chattar Manzil palace,î said Maggi, pointing towards the CDRI. Sid and Dash looked around in disbelief. They had expected a grand, shimmering, complex. In old photographs they had seen the complex to have a group of buildings, Chattar Manzil, Farhad Baksh, Choti Chattar Manzil, and Darshan Bilas around a central court. But today there was a wide road dividing the whole complex and the buildings lay in a dilapidated condition, most of them being government offices. A far cry from the splendour of a palace!

ìIt certainly needs more care and attention,î said Dash. He suddenly looked at his watch and cried, ìOh! My God! Itís four oíclock already, I had to meet my Aunt at four. î Saying that he hurriedly started off on the cycle.

ìIím not carrying Maggi,î Sid said indignantly.

ì You donít have to,î replied Maggi with a naughty smile. ìHeís taking your cycle not mine. Youíll have to walk it back.î

ìI canít walk back, its too far off,î protested Sid.

ìAll right, Iíll take a cycle rickshaw, Barista is not that far from here.î Saying that Dash walked off looking for a

rick. Sid and Maggi sat down on the payment unsure what to do now.

ìI still have an hour before curfew time,î said Maggi. ìLetís go and play table tennis at my school. I have a membership card.î All three friends were fond of table tennis.

ìWhatís the point, you always loose,î teased Sid.

ìNo, I donít,î answered Maggi. ìLets have a match.î

ìFine,î said Sid and both got up, dusted their jeans, mounted their cycles and started off towards the La Martiniere Girls College, which was quite close by. They crossed the stadium and moved past the State Bank of India. The main gate to the school was locked. The two looked around for an alternate approach. They spotted a chowkidar.

ìHow do we reach the table tennis room?î Maggi asked.

ì You will have to leave your cycles here and walk through the side gate,î he replied. While Maggi was talking to the chowkidar, Sid spotted a long stick and started fencing with it, like using it like a sword.

ìAh! Raja Bhoj! Letís park our cycles.î Maggi said to Sid.

ëCool, isnít it,î said Sid parking his cycle.

ìIf you say so,î she replied locking her cycle. Still involved in his newly found treasure, he suggested to Maggi they play a little game with it.

ìLets lead one another holding this stick,î he said.

ìIím not sure I understand,î replied Maggi.

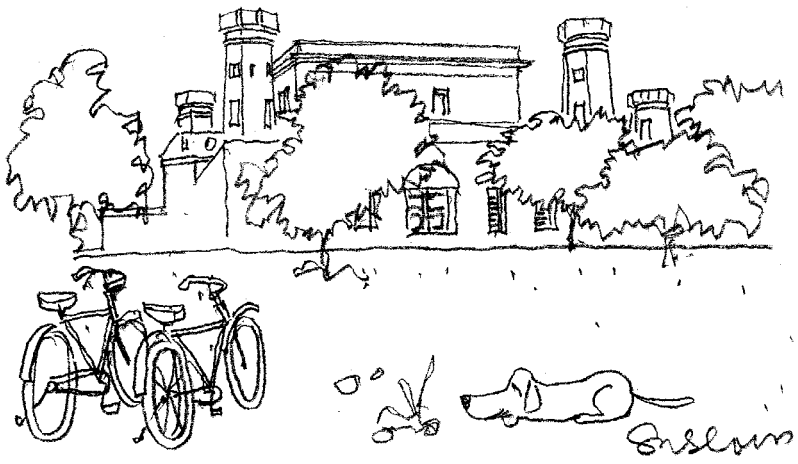
ì You close your eyes, and Iíll lead you with this stick for half the distance. Then you can lead me for the second

half,î he explained.

ìAll right,î said Maggi always game for some adventure. She closed her eyes and let Sid lead her for some distance. The experience was quite unnerving. She could hear cars honking, rickshaws creaking, people talking, but she was more conscious of the texture of the pavement below her feet. One wrong move and she would fall. Not that she didnít trust Sid but she was not used to being visually handicapped.

ìThatís it,î said Maggi, unable to bear the darkness any more. ìI do pity the blind. They are left to the mercy of others. Your turn now. î

When Maggi opened her eyes she was standing a little distance away from the old *kothi*, Khurshid Manzil, near the



deep moat which surrounded it.

ìOh! No! I donít trust you,î said Sid.

ìThatís not fair, rules are rules,î Maggi replied.

ìAll right,î said Sid and allowed Maggi to lead him along but only after he had cracked his eyelids slightly. The two walked along.

ì We have reached. You can open your eyes now, î informed Maggi. And Sid was only too happy to end the charade.

ìLets go and play,î said Sid.

ìBut we donít have any rackets,î said Maggi.

ì Weíll just have to borrow from somebody,î Sid suggested moving on, unperturbed. The sun had lost much of its light and it was nearing dusk as the two entered the table tennis complex. An attendant sat outside the room.

ìDo you have spare rackets and a ball?î Sid asked him.

ì Yes,î replied the attendant and went to the cupboard to collect a pair. ìThat will cost you rupees five per hour. î

ìThank you,î said Sid and paid him the money. He handed over one racket to Maggi. They entered a room where two girls were playing. The atmosphere there was eerie. Most of the old *kothis* had large rooms with high wooden ceilings, covered with beautifully coloured stucco work. The room itself was oblong in shape, and a table was laid in the center. A single lamp hung on top of the table. The echo of the ball filled the room. The two friends sat on two broken chairs and waited for their turn. Soon the girls finished their game

and left the room. Maggi and Sid were left alone in the large hall with the lamp quietly dangling from the ceiling. Without the sound of the ball the room was filled with an uneasy silence.

ìLets play,î said Maggi quickly to break the silence.

ìAll right, we will play best of five matches,î answered Sid.

ìNo, we donít have enough time for that, three would be better,î said Maggi.

ìOk! But lets have a bet,î said Sid.

ìWhatever you wish, I wonít loose,î Maggi replied confidently.

ìA kiss from you if you loose,î said Sid. Maggi looked up in surprise at this unexpected reply from her friend to see a naughty yet sinister expression on Sidís face. Or maybe it looked sinister because of the odd lighting. It all seemed very strange as the two were very good friends and she did not know how to react. She shook her head as if to cast away her doubts and brushed away the fears, fully confident of Sidís pranks and his constant effort to tease her.

ìI wonít loose,î she repeated as if to convince herself. Sid started the game. Maggi, usually a good player, could not concentrate due to Sidís behaviour. The atmosphere of the room did nothing to improve the same. Her hands became moist as she started loosing. Her whole attention was now on Sid to detect any unusual behaviour. But he played on with a stone face. Maggi lost the first game. They exchanged

places not saying a word. The air was now thick with tension. Maggi was on the far side of the door and felt trapped. Her heartbeats pounded in her ears drowning Sidís voice as he announced the game point. She lost again. She kept her racket on the table and wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans. She looked imploringly at Sid. But something had got into him and he walked towards her to claim his prize. Maggi stood mesmerized in the dark, silent room, watching him approach. The sound of the ball falling on the ground broke her reverie and she flew past him, out of the room, into the gathering darkness of the evening, beyond the realm of her innocent childhood.